A House of Meanings

Christian Worship in Plain Language

Juan Oliver

CHURCH PUBLISHING INCORPORATED

Contents

Chapter I

Signs of Grace

How Worship Works

The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.[1]

For some time now you have been exploring life as a Christian. I say exploring because the process is never-ending—life in Christ is that rich. Throughout, you may have struggled with difficult issues like the meaning of Bible passages, the brokenness of the Church, and perhaps even your own brokenness and God's never ending love and compassion for us and all creation.

You have also engaged in an ever-deepening relationship with God, both in intimate solitude and in worship shared with others. You have joined other Christians and other groups in our work of love and compassion for the neediest, combating the structural causes of poverty, suffering, disease, and environmental degradation in our time. These also are aspects of being a mature Christian.

---

1 The Book of Common Prayer (hereafter BCP), 857.

Throughout all this, though, you may have wondered about the meanings of worship.

Like any human action repeated over thousands of years, the Christian worship of God has come to contain words, phrases, and ideas that increasingly seem unclear, preposterous, even fatuous. It is not surprising that they have become obscure and perhaps even unintelligible to some of us and certainly to non-Christians. Additionally, our society is, by leaps and bounds, quickly forgetting the spiritual dimension of life. Some try to fill this very real absence by exotic forms of worship, from another time and another place. Others reject it out of hand, ending up understanding worship as little more than a social get-together. Instead, I invite you to join me in exploring the deep meanings of Christian worship—meanings profoundly human *and divine* developed through our worship practices in the first centuries of our existence as the Church.

Most of my life I have been enthralled, excited, moved, mystified, and annoyed by Christian worship. Still, I find it, like God, an inexhaustible source of meanings. I say meanings in the plural because, as I hope you will discover, the meaning of worship is never a single thing, but a multiplicity of meanings, layered together into a rich, complex experience that can transform us and sustain us as we grow spiritually, individually, and as communities of faith.

Often we think that the meaning of something is somehow given, official, or universal, singular. But as Lutheran liturgical scholar Michael Aune wrote, meanings are always meanings-to-someone.[2] That someone, in this book, is not me, but *you*. You will be discovering and elaborating the meaning of worship for *you*; in the process, I will be bringing out, from storage, as it were, the meanings of worship to *us*, the Christian community over the earliest centuries for you to engage in dialogue with the sources of our tradition.

Personal and shared meaning. This book is about the meanings of worship. In the romance languages derived from Latin, meaning is translated as "significance"—what something signifies, as Aune notes, "to someone." So it is one thing to look up the meaning of baptism in order to find out what the Episcopal Church thinks it means officially, and a whole other thing to share the meaning of your child's baptism with your friends over a cup of coffee. One meaning is official and formal, even doctrinal. Yours is yours. *We should not assume that therefore yours is less real.* It may or may not agree with the meaning to the rest of us as larger community have framed, in which case conversation may be encouraged and sought out.

---

2 Michael B. Aune, "Worship in an Age of Subjectivism Revisited," *Worship* 65 (1991): 225. For the expression "meanings-to-someone," see Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press,1990), 42.

In this light we can expect Christian liturgy to have as many meanings as there are worshippers! And yet, the doctrinal meanings of liturgy rose through time precisely out of personal meanings shared, discussed, and argued about until we could come to a more or less *shared* meaning.

Liturgical meaning, therefore, is much more common and widespread than what a theology student reads in a library. Of course, a person might still go to church to socialize or hear beautiful music, or out of just plain boredom and depression. In those cases, the meaning of the event to them is different from the meaning of eucharistic worship to the wider Church.

Ritualization. Worship is a form of human ritualization. We humans ritualize all over the place, for all sorts of reasons. From the scheduled football game to the family gathering at Grandma's for Sunday dinner, to graduations, birthdays, and so forth. We set apart a time and place to do something meaningful to us in a more or less structured way. These events, tiny or very grand, are *patterned*: they have norms, musts and must nots, even a history. They identify us as part of a larger whole, whether it be a team, network, family, neighborhood, or community. So Christian ritualization or worship is action at a place and time set apart, involving musts and must nots, with a history and layers of meanings.

Worship, made up of signifying actions, creates a meaningful experience. It does *not* do this, for the most part, by presenting us with ideas, but by engaging participants in *patterned behavior*—and so ritual is much more about doing than about saying. Throughout this book, therefore, we will be trying to link the actions (including texts) that we carry out in worship to what it means both to us individually and as a community travelling through time, landscapes, and cultures.

It used to be thought that ritual communicates ideas and myths (that is, stories with a meaning). After all, it is full of them. This was the general view toward the end of the nineteenth century. Later, however, Clifford Geertz discovered that rituals not only convey ideas, but form in us an *ethos* and *worldview*.[3] Ethos is a specific "flavor" or way of behaving. Worldview is a community's understanding (intellectual *and affective*) of the world as it is and their place in it. So rituals present to the participants a felt sense (not only understood) of what their life in the world should look and feel like: the proper way to live. It is because of this ritualization of "the proper way" that participants can know when they fall short of it. Additionally, ritual action often integrates our constant failure to live the ideal life through purifications, forgiveness, renewals, and closures.

---

3 These terms are defined in Clifford Geertz. "Ethos and World View and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books), 126 ff.

The sacred. Religious rituals especially have a way of presenting themselves as *sacred and authoritative,* sanctioning different aspects of the community's life. These rituals crown kings and ordain religious leaders, join couples in marriage, and deal properly with human remains.

The sacredness of religious ritual is facilitated, if not downright constructed, by taking place at a place and time cut off—even if temporarily—from everyday "profane" life and declared to be sacred precisely because it is set apart. Thus student of ritual Jonathan Z. Smith pointed out that a thing, person, or event becomes sacred through "emplacement"—by *taking place* in a *sacred context*.[4] The chalice at the eucharist, for example, is not sacred because of its design or costly metal but because it is employed in a sacred action.

We can, of course, find other experiences in life "sacred" beyond ritual, directly, as it were. Rudolf Otto referred to these experiences as "numinous" —an experience of divinity—which *may* appear in worship, but may also just as well appear in nature, in relationships, and throughout all our lives. It is the human experience of *transcendence,* of there being more to life than what is apparent.[5]

---

4 Jonathan Z Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

5 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

At the core of religious ritual, then, is the sacred as a place and time set apart from the "profane." But the sacred place is actually the same as the profane, only demarcated as sacred *by ritual action,* whether it is the consecration of a church or the circle formed by worshipers celebrating the eucharist at a picnic table in the woods. This is important, for one goal of ritual is to reveal that all of reality is sacred, sending us back to it to experience everything as holy, and live accordingly.

Signs. Our lives are full of them. Not only traffic signs, but also much richer, complex sign-actions, like sharing a meal or a hug. Signs are always *expressions of something beyond themselves.* They always have two parts: the sign (arms around a person, for example) and what is signified (friendship or love). In our exploration we will try to keep both poles in balance: the *sign* and what is *signified.*

Some signs mean univocally; that is, they are designed to convey a single meaning. A red octagon with STOP on it directly conveys an order to stop your vehicle, without any other possible interpretation. Others convey meaning more indirectly, with multiple resonances and meanings. A birthday party, for example means much more than "you are older now"; it also means "we appreciate and love you, we are happy you exist," and so forth.

Our worship is a system of sign-actions, or to put it more grammatically, *signifying acts,* which *must*

carry meaning for the participants in order to signify. If—for example—in order to hug you, I must explain what a hug is, hugging is not working well as a sign. Signs work best when they easily and without explanation lead us to the signified. So the sign actions in worship need to be clear, and graspable, by both our minds and hearts.

In order for signs to work as signs, we must engage them analogically. An analogy is a comparison based on a similarity. If I said, "The forest is covering the hill as my green shirt is covering me," I would be stating an analogy. Based on that comparison, however, I might say, poetically, "The hill wears a green shirt." The latter is a metaphor, based on my earlier analogy. Of course, the hill is doing nothing of the sort, since the forest is not clothing, but the reader gets the point of comparison *immediately*, through a compressed analogy, that is, a metaphor. In this example "shirt" has become a sign for "forest." It would be sheer silliness, however, to take the metaphor *literally* and demand to know whether the forest is made of cotton fabric! As moderns, our increasing inability to think poetically drives us to think only literally, making our experience of sign-actions increasingly difficult. The water of baptism, for example, can remain just water, bearing no further freight of meaning. We cannot see it as the waters of the Flood, the Red Sea, and the River Jordan as its blessing prayer suggests. For those with a

literal bend eating and drinking bread and wine in memory of Jesus is just that: the bread is just bread, the wine just wine. They do not *signify* and make present Christ, whose Body we are as a community. If understood literally, the bread and wine only make themselves present, and thus *do not work as signs,* but point only to themselves. In today's world, where many consider only empirical data real, leaving out subjectivity (meaning, feeling, memory, and so forth), it is increasingly difficult for many to see something as a sign or icon that makes present what it signifies. For the ancients, however, the sign or icon made the signified *present*. Instead, too often now what to them was a world shining with mutual references, is opaque to us.

The stuff of signs. Our signifying actions in worship are human actions, and so they are *embodied,* for worship does not consist only of sharing ideas, but of doing something in a specific place, decorating it perhaps, moving, engaging objects, gesturing, washing, eating, anointing, keeping silence, singing, and speaking—all things related to or done by our *bodies*.

We can't very well gather to only *think* about God, without anything visible. If we could, the Church would be a sort of collection of preserved brains, a thing for science fiction. Like it or not, we need visible, tangible, physical sign-actions in order to have liturgy, even if it consists only of bodies sitting together to meditate. Perhaps this is why the Ortho-

dox sing, celebrating the triumph of Orthodoxy over those who would destroy icons,

> No one could circumscribe the Word of the Father; but when He took flesh from you, O Mother of God, He accepted to be circumscribed, and restored our fallen image to its former beauty. We confess and proclaim our salvation in words and images.[6]

It is precisely thanks to the enfleshment of God in Jesus that we can and must use physical signs to live our spiritual lives physically, audibly, visually, incarnationally. This is why worship cannot be only a sharing of ideas, but an event in which bodies do signifying actions. In worship the "spiritual" is also physical, so much so that Pope Leo the Great would write that ". . . what had been visible in Christ [his body], after the ascension, became the sacraments of the Church."[7]

Engaging the sign in faith. What does it take to be able to "read" the sign-actions and enter into them? St. Thomas Aquinas, commenting on the classical

6 Orthodox Kontakion for the first Sunday of Lent, Sunday of the Triumph of Orthodoxy.

7 Leo the Great, Sermon on the Ascension, 74.

definition of sacraments at the head of this chapter, pointed out that as outward signs sacraments effect inward grace given our proper *disposition in faith.* We are so accustomed to the word *faith* meaning the assent of our minds to an unprovable claim that we have lost the full meaning of the Greek term *pistis,* which means, rather, trusting allegiance—a much fuller resonance, closer to "the trust of my heart," or "confidently relying on." This meaning may be best captured by our use of the word followed by "in," as in, "I have faith *in* you, son." Faith in this sense is the trust of the whole person (mind and feelings) in the object of trust, in this case, God. You may have noticed, for example, that in the Creed we do not say, "We believe *that. . .*" but, "we believe *in. . . .*"

The sacraments, then, convey God's grace to the participants as they *put the trust of their heart in God.* Our ability to engage a sacramental sign always involves trust in God and God's gracious action through worship and what it signifies. If we have no faith in God, nor care at all who Jesus Christ was, if we think the eucharist is simply another social gathering, and do not have any trust in its ability to re-present or manifest Christ among us, the sacrament is still the sacrament, but we cannot open up to the grace that it brings about in us. For God's self-offering to us is there all the time, but God will not force us to accept the free gift of grace. We must open its door with a trusting faith.

At the very least, faithful allegiance involves our suspending disbelief, like spectators at a play. We trust in what the signs represent, holding in tension *both* the knowledge that we are participating in sign-actions, *and* at the same time experiencing the realities that they signify.

Worship, then is made up of sign-actions, which are at the same time both a sign and the reality they make present. This was beautifully explained to me by six-year-old Stephanie, in the wisest sacramental insight I have ever heard. When I asked her, "Tell me, what is the bread we eat here?" She proudly recited, "The bread on the altar is the Body of Christ." Then she hesitated, thinking, and added, "Well, it isn't, but it is."

Grace. Our catechism definition says that sacraments are signs of inner *grace*. Christian conceptions of grace, however, bear little resemblance to the way we use the term to mean beauty, charm, or attractiveness. In Greek, grace (*charis*) means gift, and therefore in theology, grace is God's free *(unearned)* gift toward us. That is, God's love for God's creation—all of it, not only humans. In this way the sacraments are a main way in which our participation in the life of God is revealed, named, acknowledged, and made stronger. Grace is not a thing, or a commodity to be dispensed, but *God's own loving self-giving to us*. We can now fill out the definition of sacraments a bit further:

> Sacraments are visible, physical, external Christian sign-actions through which God's own divine life is shared with the participants given their disposition in trusting faith.

A sign of what? What does the Christian community's significant actions in worship represent as a whole? Let me suggest for now that our gathering to worship God makes present, not only God, but our vision of life lived with and in God's presence—what the gospels call "the kingdom, or reign, of God": that is, *this world* as God would have it, restored and healed in truth, justice, peace, and love.

Christian worship is a sign of God's reign, even though that reign has obviously not arrived among us yet. The coming Reign of God is made present and actual to us *via* the system of signs that is worship—and we can be aware of both at the same time, much as six-year-old Stephanie wisely noticed.

Further, our ritual enactment of the reign is *formative,* for in worship we learn the attitudes (worldview) and behaviors (ethos) proper to the Reign of God and are formed in them by enacting it as it would look and feel if it were to arrive here and now.

Sacrament and liturgy. Finally, since we use the terms "sacrament" and 'liturgy" quite often, let me explain their origins and meaning. In the third century Ter-

tullian wrote that a Christian soldier could not take an oath of loyalty to the emperor, a *sacramentum,* because in baptism he had already taken one to Jesus Christ. This is how we got "sacrament" in Western Christianity. In the Eastern Churches, however, the term has always been *mysterion*, or mystery. But it does not mean something unknown, like the murderer in a who-done-it. Rather a *mysterion* (from *mus*, or shhhh!) in this context is a rite about which one keeps quiet, for it can only be experienced properly by those prepared to engage it through a process of instruction and transformation. When St. Jerome translated the Bible into Latin he translated *mysterion* as *sacramentum.*

Whether sacraments or mysteries, the sign-actions of the Christian community take place in the context of *liturgy*. Originally, the term did not mean anything like ritual. In the ancient Greek city-states citizens had the obligation to do work (*orge*) for the welfare of *all* the people (*laos*). They might pave a road, build a bridge or equip a company of soldiers for a war. This activity was termed *leitourgia.* So liturgy was, first and foremost, work done on *behalf of the people* and their well-being. "Public works," if you will.

When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the Hebrew word *avodah* (service to God in the temple) was translated as *leitourgia*. And so liturgy came to mean both a service to the people

and service to God. For these reasons "liturgy" refers not only to a Christian *worship service*, but also Christian work in service to the people—especially the poor, the sick, our planet, and so forth. For we are not to stay in church forever, but are always sent out to cooperate with God in the birthing of a new world—the Reign of God—and aware and thankful, we recognize God at work in every aspect of life, from the weed in the garden to the love of spouses.

This then, is the scope of *The House of Meanings*: we will be reflecting together on your—and the Church's—experience of worship. As ritual, our worship has many things in common with all the other rituals of humanity: it does what it does—create in us a shared ethos and worldview—by employing sign-actions that engage us in a rehearsal of God's coming reign of truth, justice, peace, and love. Since these actions are signs, they are meant to convey meaning and meaningfulness. For us to receive God's grace conveyed by these sacramental signs, we need to approach them with an open, trusting allegiance (faith) exercising a willing suspension of disbelief, to enter the sign and get to engage the depth of the sign's meanings. These sign-actions enable us to see and feel God's loving will to heal all of creation, and to know how God's reign will look and feel when it arrives. Equipped with this vision, and familiar with the signs of the Reign of God, we can go out into the world recog-

nizing God already at work in it, joining in God's mission to heal it.

Finally, our system of sign-actions that is worship—all of it—stems from a historical event: the life, message, service, witness, arrest, torture, execution and ongoing life of a first-century Galilean itinerant rabbi, Jesus, the Anointed One (Messiah, or Christ). And so it is to the celebration of those events in Holy Week, that we now turn.